

Why Go Back to the Old Vocation After Witnessing the Resurrection?

A Bible Study on Peter's Return to Fishing

Reflections The Passion, Cross and Resurrection 3 May 2025

John 21 (referenced)

Acts 1:4-5 (referenced)

Peter and his companions were witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus. They were blessed with encounters with the Living God. But we find that Peter led his friends back to fishing, their original occupation, by the time of the fourth appearance of the risen Jesus. I have always wondered why they did that. It is an intriguing question, rooted in John chapter twenty-one, which describes how, after Jesus' Resurrection, Peter says, "I am going fishing," and the other disciples join him.

The question is rich and many-sided. Peter's decision to return to fishing has been seen as a mixture of human uncertainty, a need for restoration, symbolic preparation for mission, and perhaps plain, ordinary necessity. The passage shows how, even after Resurrection encounters, disciples remain in process, awaiting the fullness of their calling, the empowerment of the Spirit, and the guidance of the risen Christ. Here are the main theological interpretations and schools of thought.

Peter's leadership in confusion and waiting. After the Resurrection, the disciples were uncertain about their future. Though they had seen the risen Jesus, they were not yet empowered by the Holy Spirit, since Pentecost had not happened, nor had they received their explicit mission, "Feed my sheep," "Go and make disciples of all nations," in practical terms. Peter, by nature a leader, did what he knew: he led them back to fishing as a way to fill the uncertain days.

Though an explanation, I find it a weak one. After His Resurrection, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit. This is recorded in the Book of Acts, particularly Acts 1:4-5. Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the gift His Father had promised, the Holy Spirit. He told them that they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from then, which ultimately occurred at Pentecost, about ten days later. This was during His fourth appearance. The period was specified; why, then, any uncertainty?

The "return to old life" view. Some interpret Peter's action as a regression or lapse in faith, a return to old ways after the trauma of Jesus' death, even after encountering the risen Lord. Peter may have doubted his role, especially after denying Jesus three times, seeing himself as disqualified from further ministry, and so reverted to his old

trade.

The intense feeling of guilt, and the shock of the trauma of the period before and after the crucifixion, must have placed Peter in a state approaching delusion. In such a state people generally want to do something which may not be strictly rational. I want to give Peter the benefit of the doubt here.

Symbolic or didactic purpose. John's Gospel often uses narrative and symbols. The fishing episode foreshadows the new vocation the disciples will have as "fishers of men." Their fruitless night, followed by a miraculous abundance at Jesus' word, shows that true success in mission comes only through obedience to Christ.

I would like to believe that this is a tiny piece of God's grand plan for the salvation of His people. Actions, events, and sequences become, in the end, beyond human control.

Practical or economic reading. Others take a more pragmatic approach: the disciples needed to eat. Between Resurrection appearances, with nothing to do and perhaps little to eat, since they had left their livelihoods three years before, returning to fishing was simply a way to provide for themselves. This reading sees no theological significance in it.

Peter's need for restoration and recommissioning. Some theologians point out that Peter, after denying Jesus, needed explicit restoration. The fishing scene frames the recommissioning: after a failed night and Jesus' miracle, Peter is called aside by Jesus and charged three times to "feed my sheep," paralleling his three denials. Until this moment, Peter's sense of calling may have been in question.